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[54] **BATTERY PLATE FEEDING AND HANDLING APPARATUS**

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Related U.S. Application Data

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[51] **Int. Cl.**⁷ **B65G 59/00**

[52] **U.S. Cl.** **414/798.9; 414/797.3; 414/907; 271/93; 271/150**

[58] **Field of Search** 414/798.9, 796.6, 414/797, 797.3, 907; 271/93, 91, 105, 150

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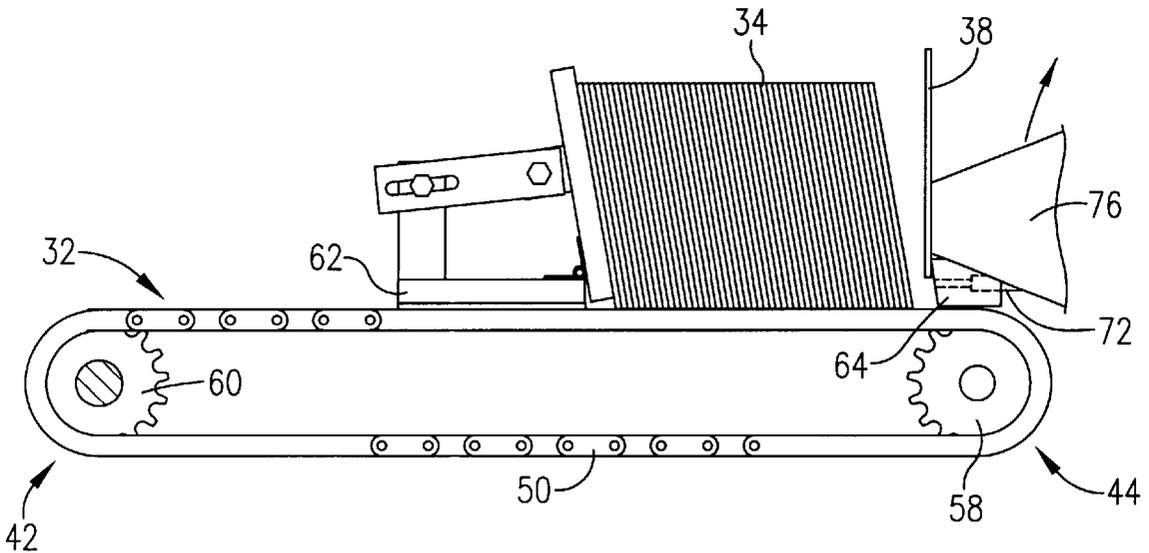
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Assistant Examiner—Douglas Hess
Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Hovey, Williams, Timmons & Collins

[57] **ABSTRACT**

A plate feeding and handling apparatus (10) that includes an improved plate feeder (32) and pick-up (36) that more effectively feed and remove plates from a stack of plates is disclosed.

7 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets



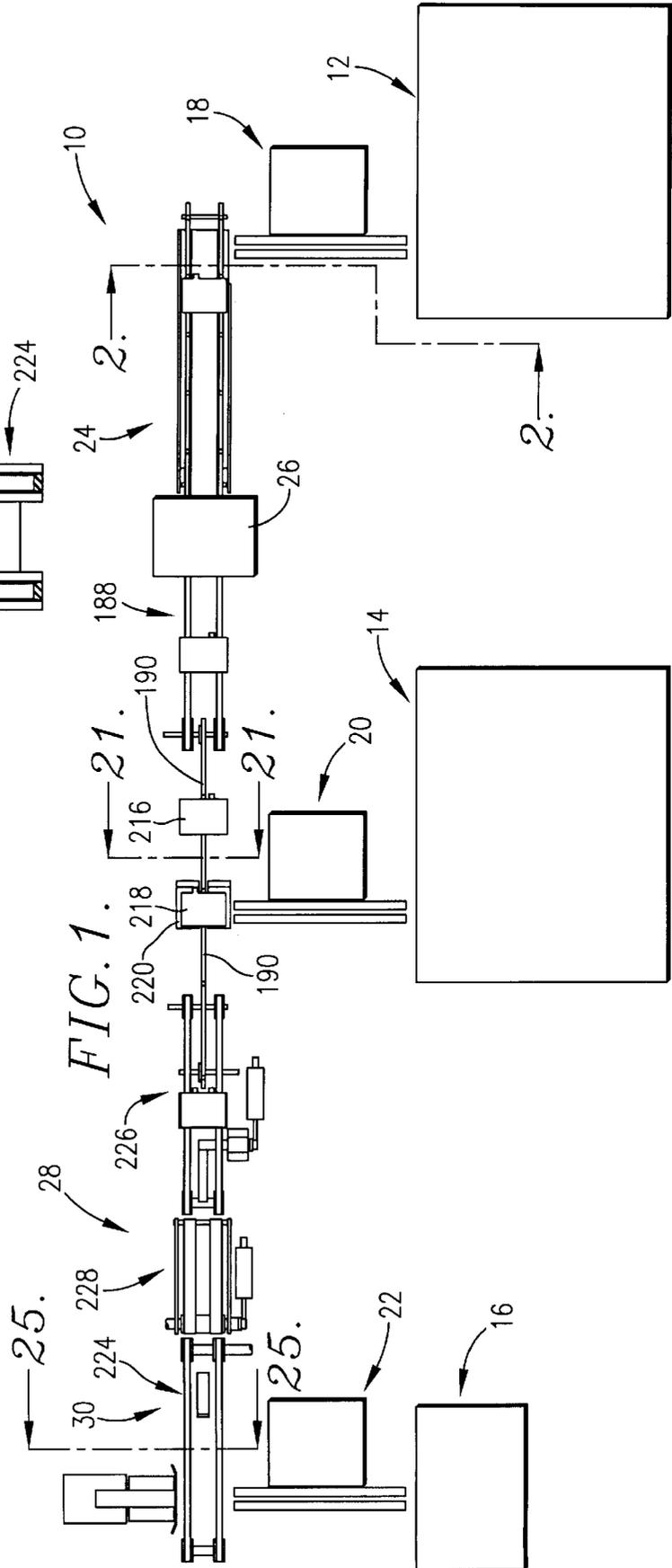
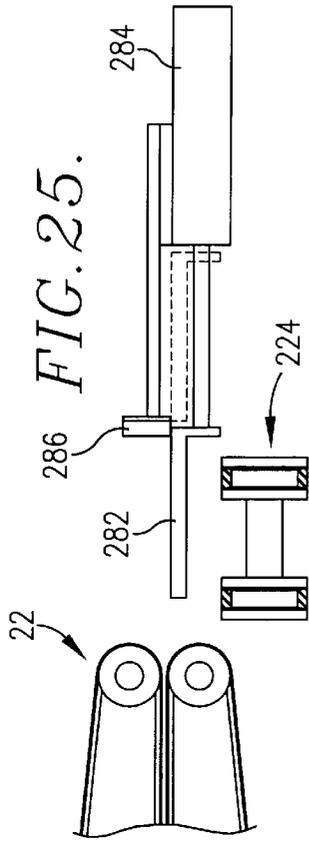
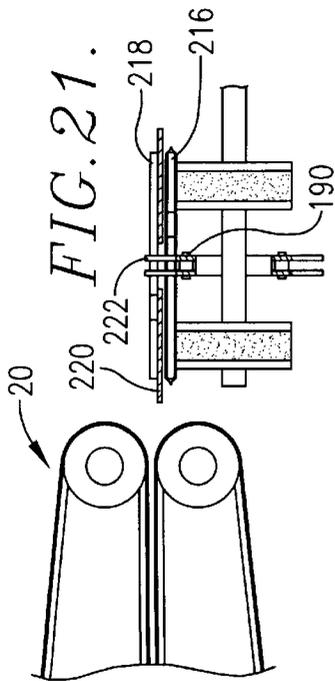


FIG. 2.

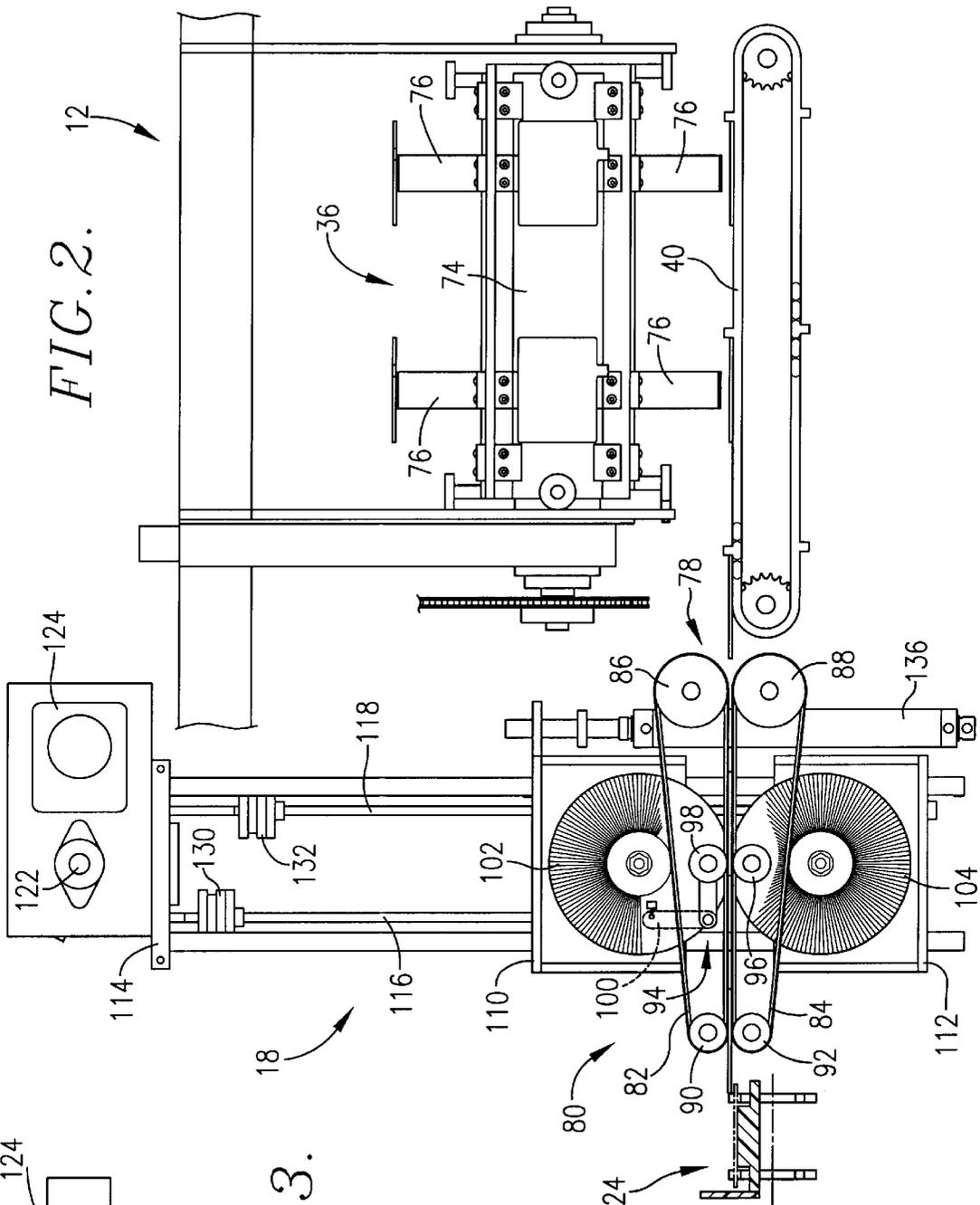
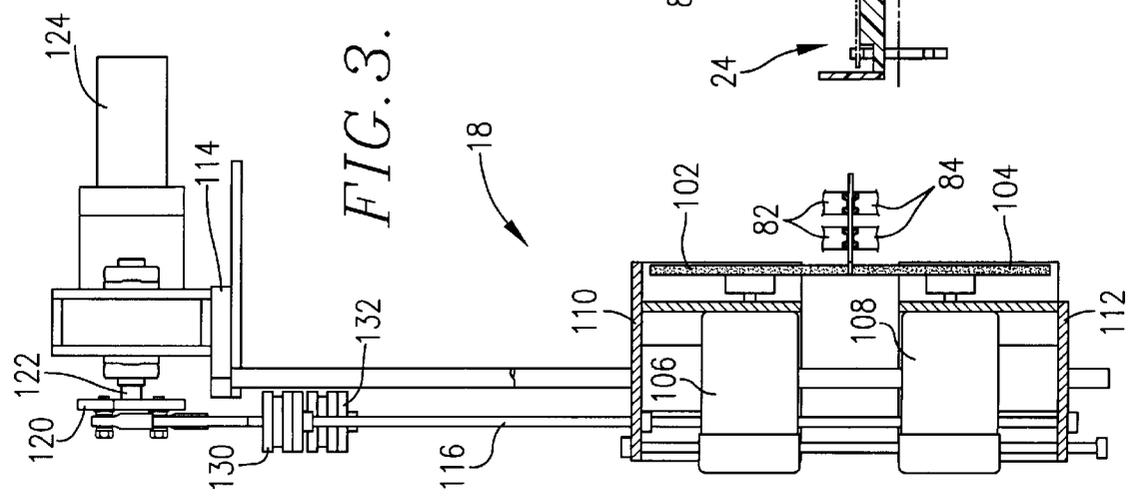


FIG. 3.



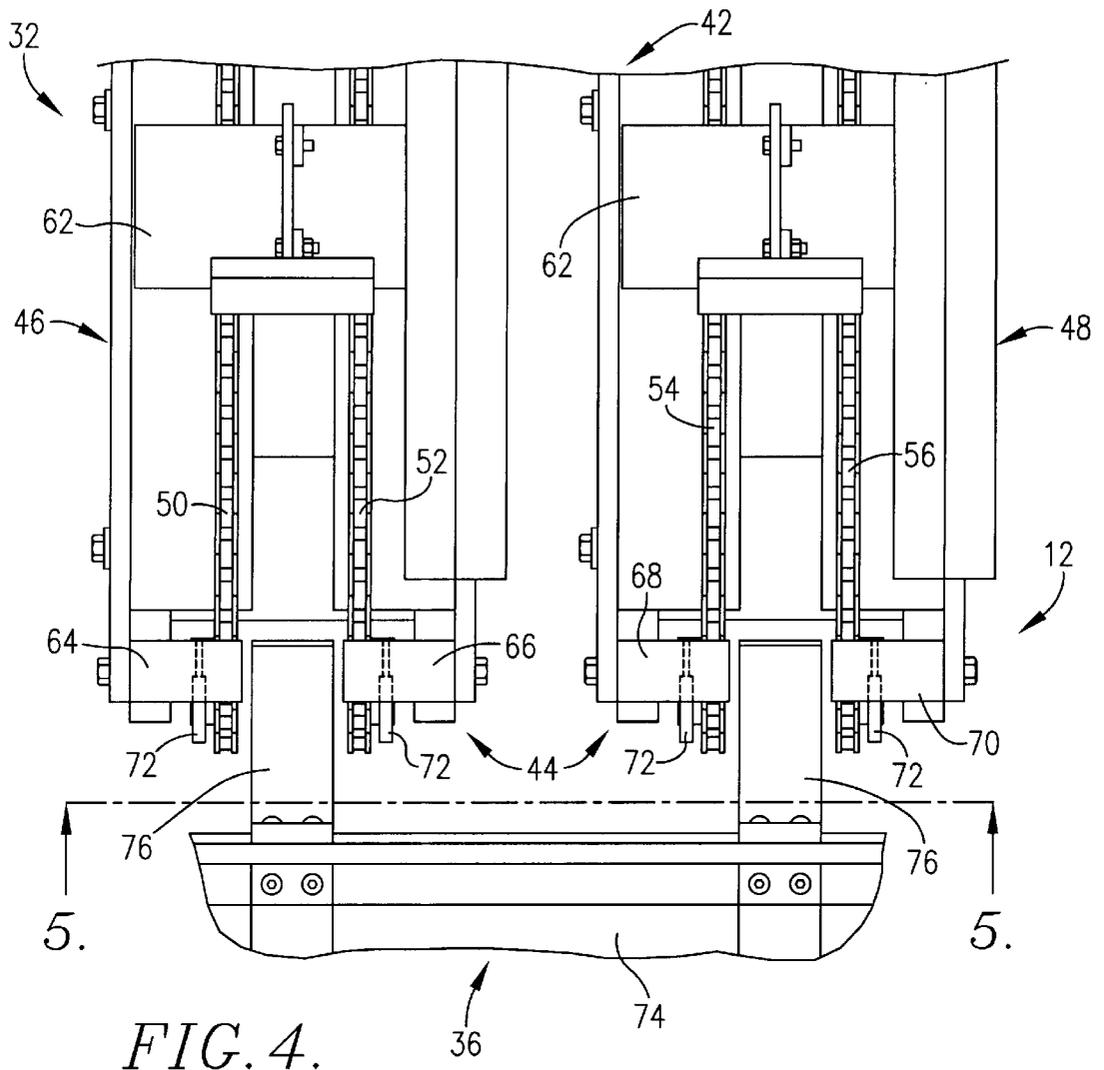
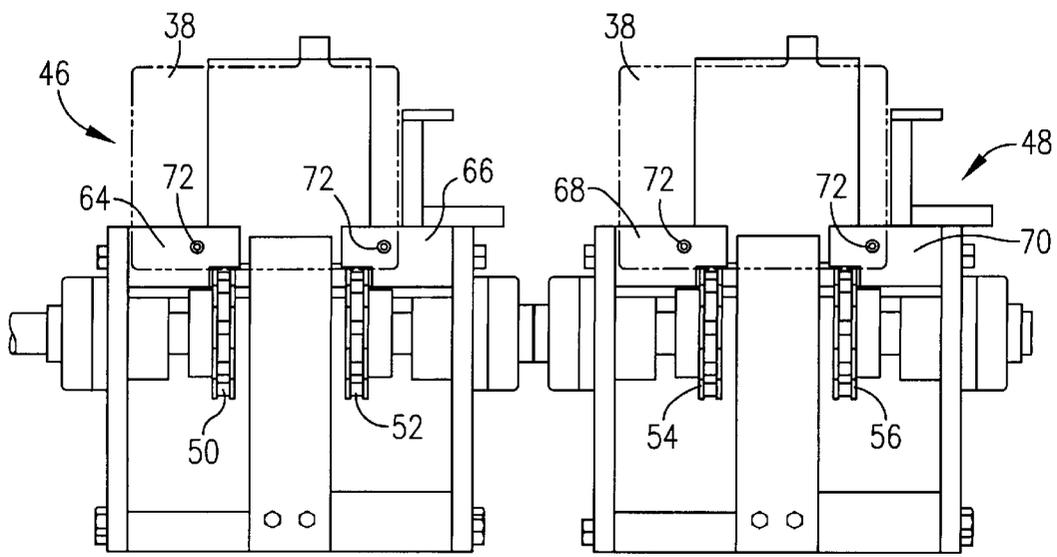
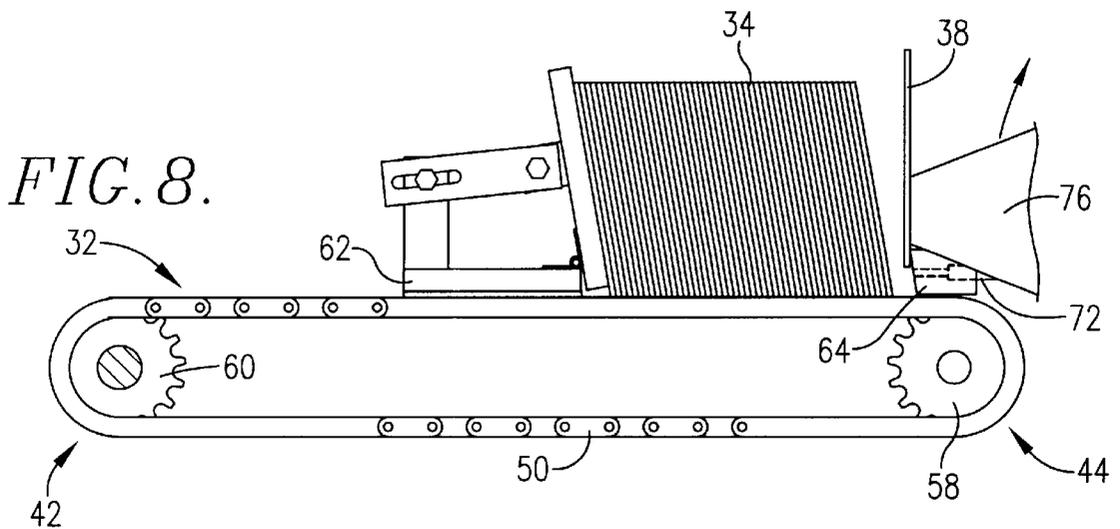
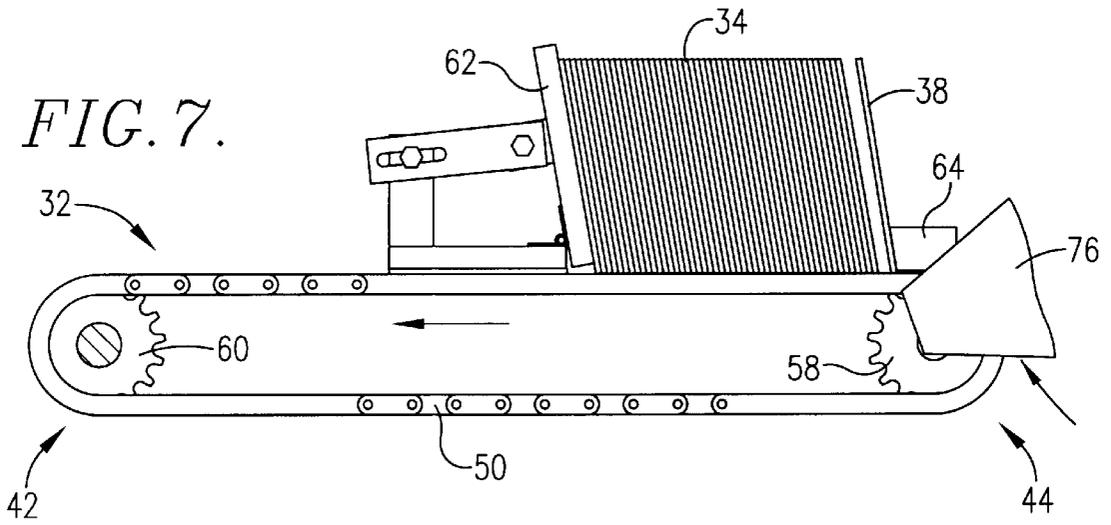
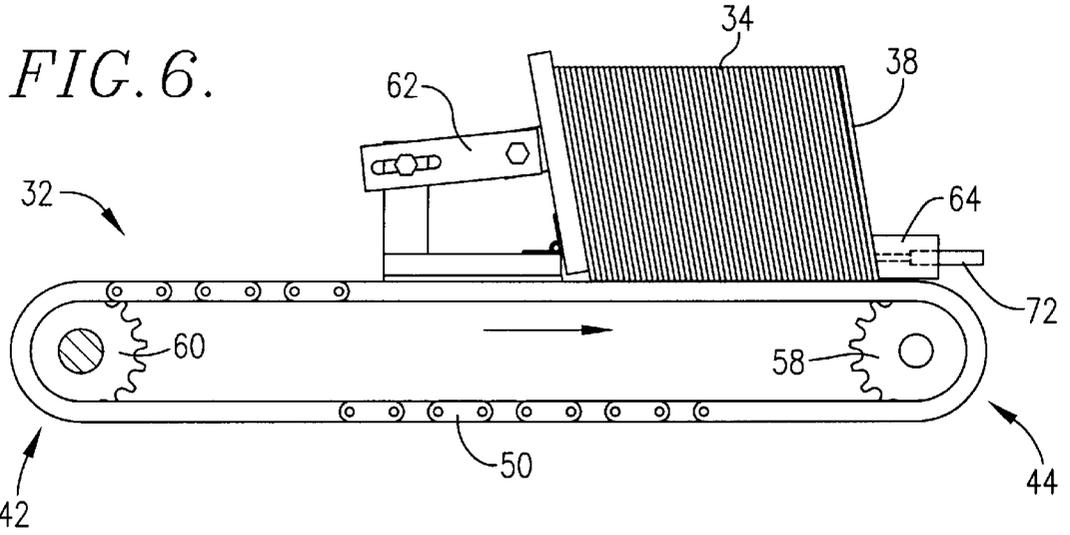
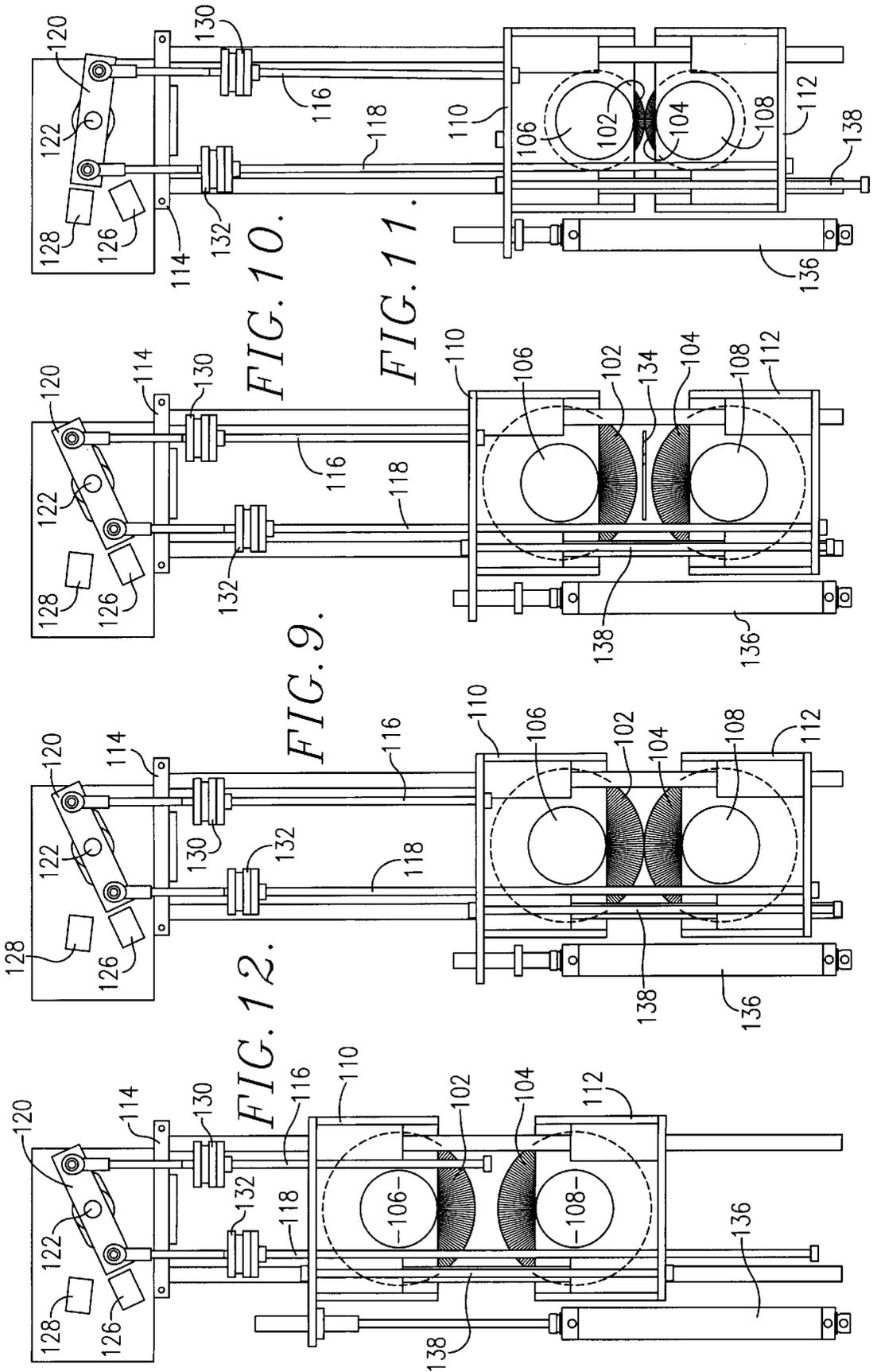


FIG. 4.

FIG. 5.







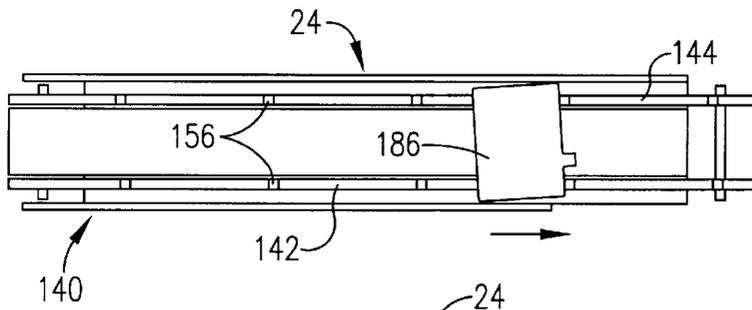


FIG. 16.

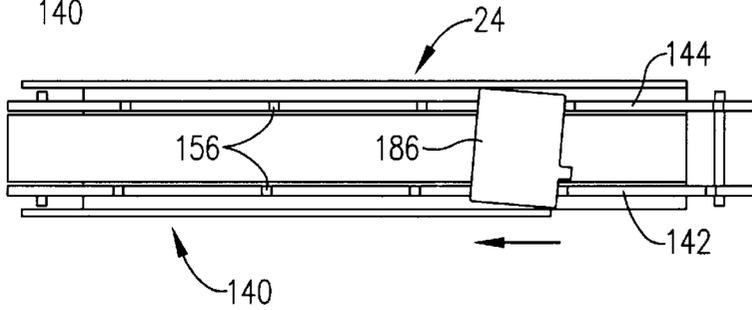


FIG. 17.

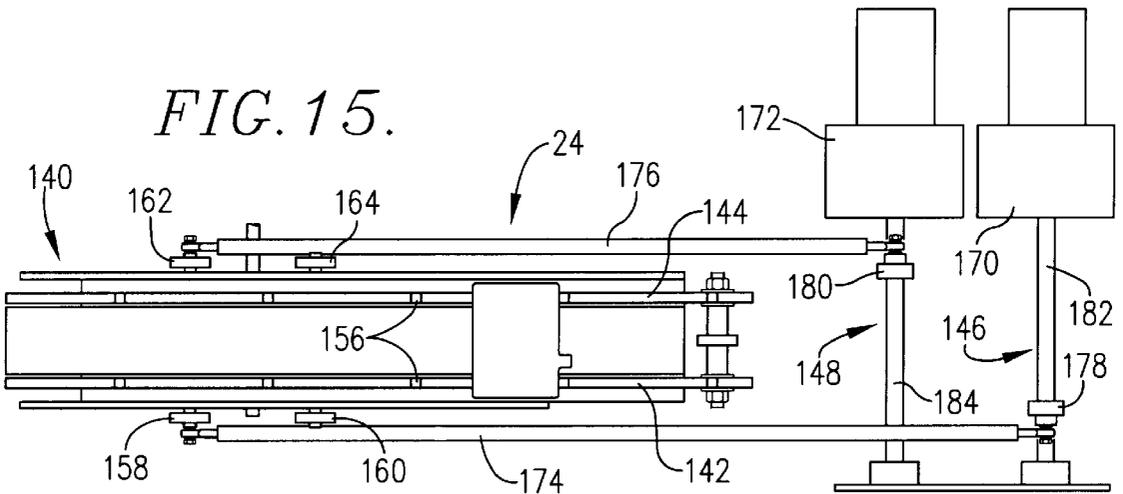


FIG. 15.

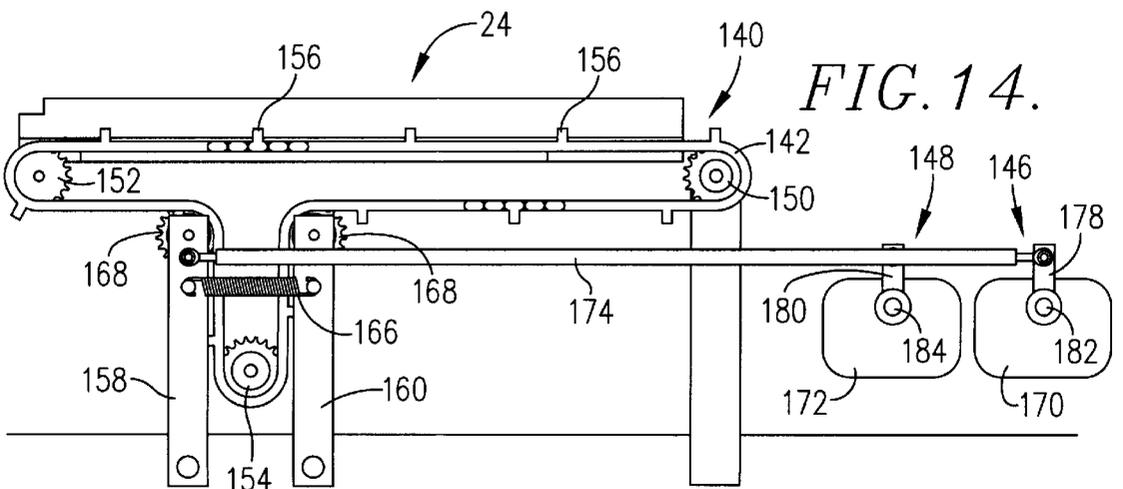


FIG. 14.

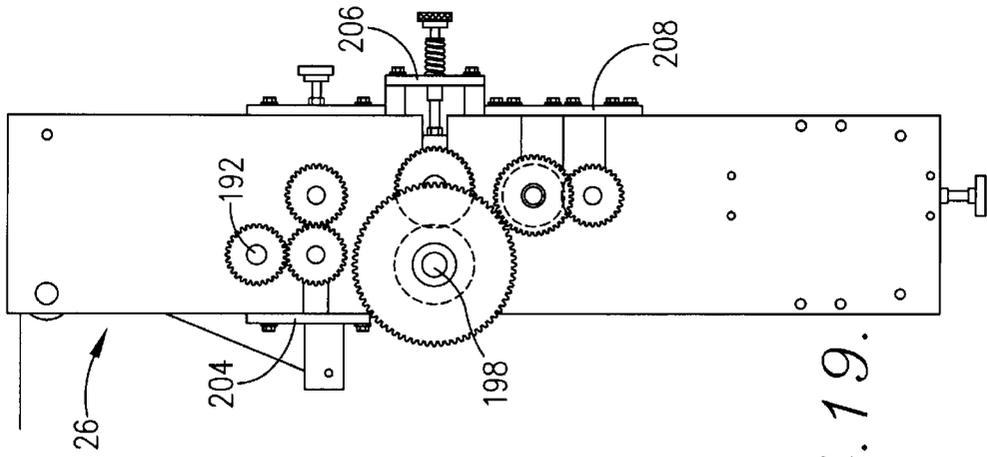


FIG. 19.

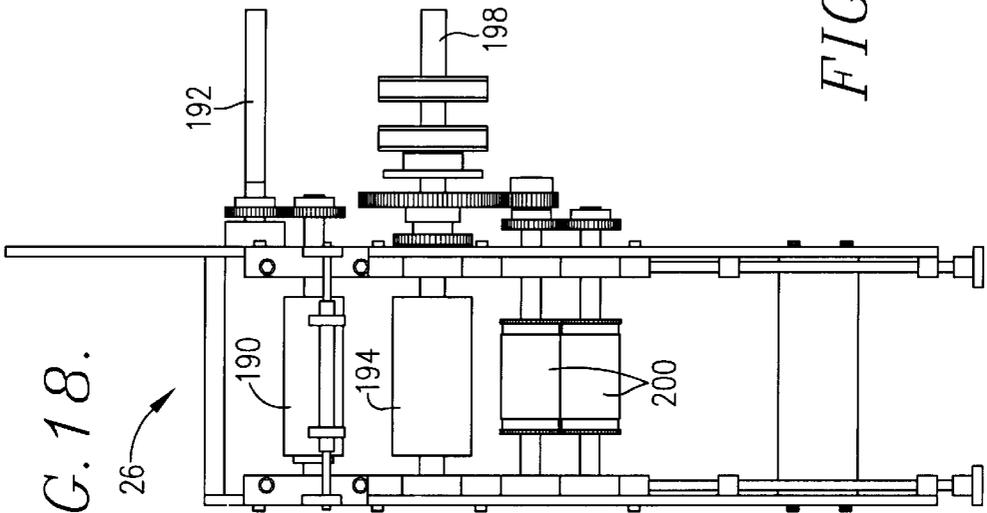


FIG. 18.

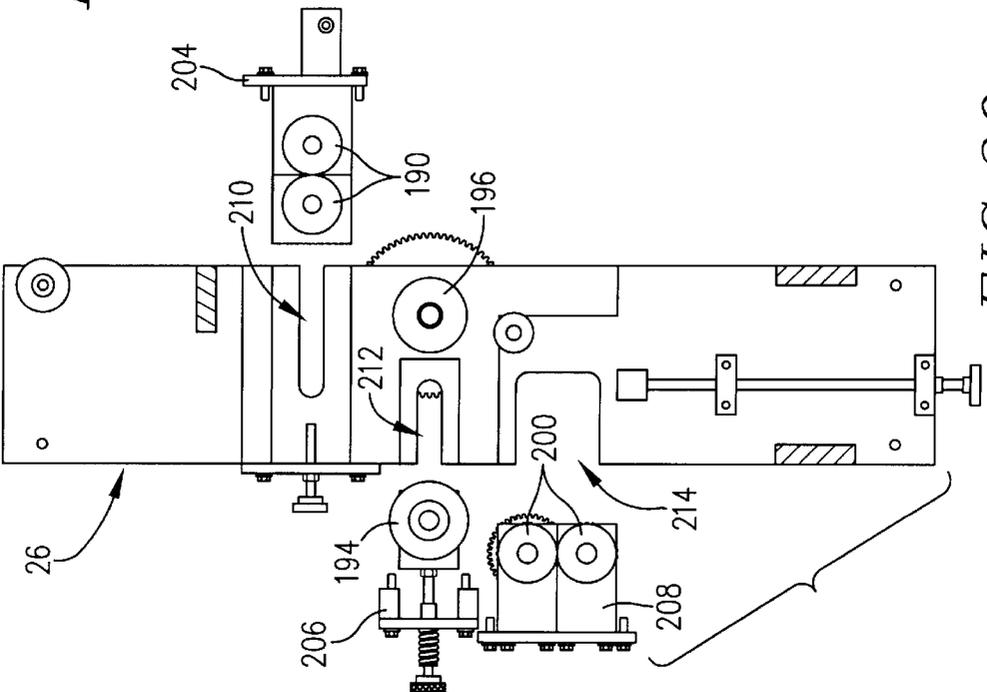
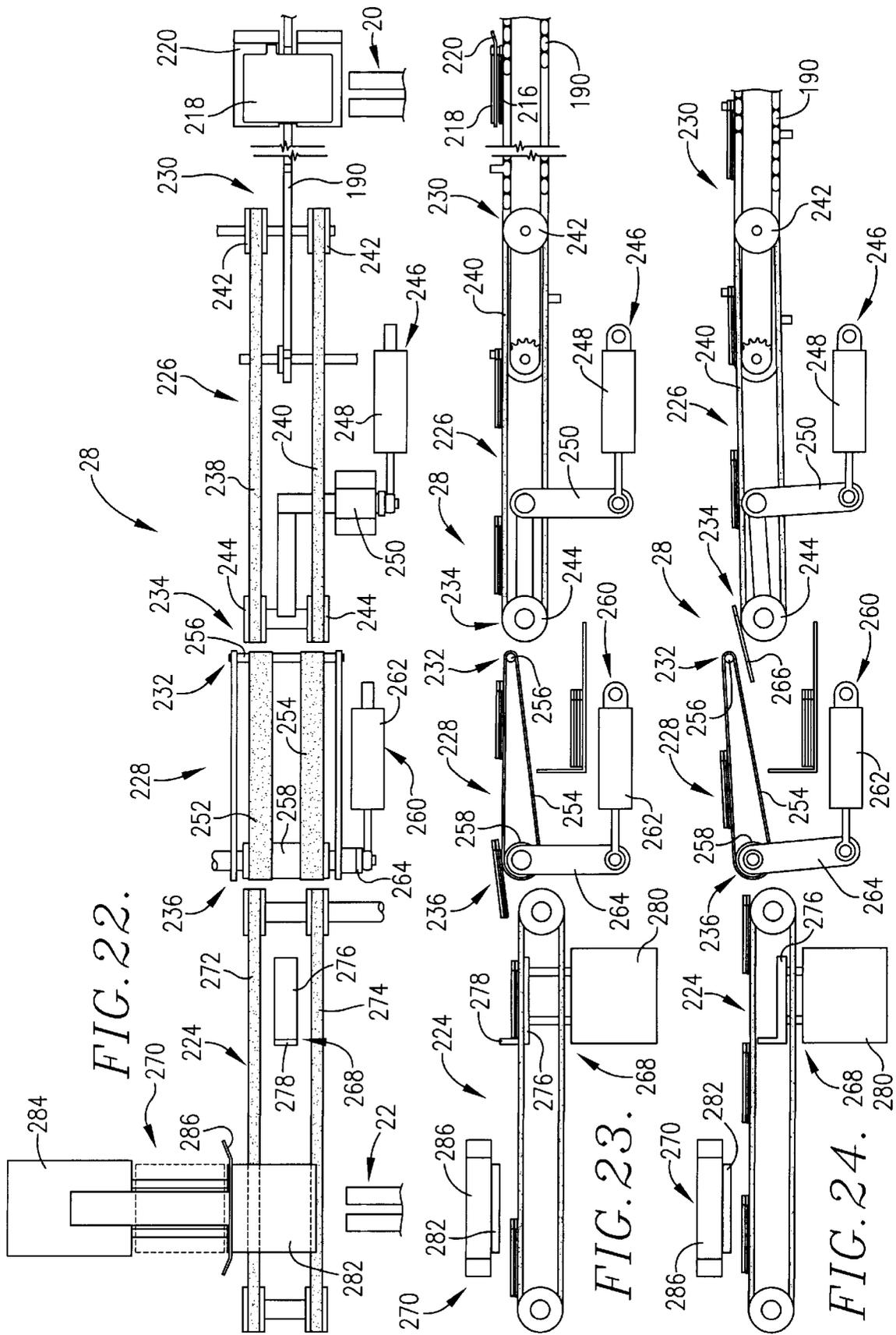


FIG. 20.



BATTERY PLATE FEEDING AND HANDLING APPARATUS

RELATED APPLICATIONS

Applicant claims the priority benefit under 35 U.S.C. Section 119(e) of U.S. provisional application Ser. No. 60/060,434 filed Sep. 30, 1997, and of U.S. provisional application Ser. No. 60/062,747 filed Oct. 23, 1997. The present application also incorporates these provisional applications by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to devices for feeding and handling stacks of plates such as lead plates used in the production of lead acid storage batteries. More particularly, the present invention relates to a battery plate feeding and handling apparatus that more effectively removes battery plates from stacks of plates, aligns or orients the plates as they are being transported, cleans the lugs on the battery plates, wraps the battery plates in insulative material, synchronizes the transport of the plates with down-stream operations, and rejects damaged or otherwise defective plates.

2. Description of the Prior Art

Lead acid storage batteries are formed from a plurality of lead plates that must be individually handled and processed during the manufacture of the batteries. Prior art devices for feeding and handling such plates suffer from several limitations that limit their utility. For example, prior art battery plate feeding and handling devices often have difficulty in removing the forwardmost plate from a stack of plates without removing more than one plate and/or damaging the plate as it is removed.

Additionally, prior art battery plate feeding and handling devices have difficulty gripping the plates and positioning lug brushes during the cleaning of the lugs of the plates, making it difficult to properly clean the battery plates. These prior art devices also have difficulty positioning or orienting the plates before they are enveloped in insulation, often resulting in mis-application of the insulation.

Prior art battery plate feeding and handling devices also have components that are difficult to adjust and/or changeover. These prior art devices also have difficulty discarding defective plates and have difficulty synchronizing the movement of the battery plates among the various stages of the battery production line.

OBJECTS AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In view of the foregoing, it is an object of the present invention to provide a battery plate feeding and handling apparatus that more effectively removes the forwardmost plate from a stack of plates without removing more than one plate and without damaging the removed plate. Additionally, it is an object of the present invention to provide such an apparatus that more effectively grips battery plates as they are being conveyed through various stages, cleans the lugs on the battery plates, aligns or orients the plates, wraps the battery plates in insulative material, synchronizes the transport of the plates with down-stream operations, and rejects damaged or otherwise defective plates.

The present invention achieves these and other objects by providing an improved plate feeding and handling apparatus that includes an improved plate feeder station having a

plurality of stops that are contacted by the forwardmost plates of stacks of plates as the stacks are advanced towards a pick-up assembly. The stops each include a vacuum port that holds the forwardmost plate of the stack against the stop while permitting the remaining plates in the stack to move slightly away from the stop, thus creating a gap between the forwardmost plate and the remaining plates in the stack for facilitating pick-up of the forwardmost plate.

The battery plate feeding and handling apparatus of the present invention also includes an improved lug brush cleaning station that more effectively grips the plates as they are being cleaned and that more effectively and consistently positions a pair of lug brushes during cleaning and servicing. The station includes structure that permits an operator to select the amount of gripping force applied to the plates as they pass therethrough. The station also includes a servo assembly that more precisely positions the rotating brushes during cleaning of the lugs on the plates.

The apparatus of the present invention also includes a plate alignment station that allows an operator to more easily adjust the position of the plates as they enter a plate enveloper. Specifically, the plate alignment station includes a pair of side-by-side conveyor chains for carrying the plates to the plate enveloper and a servo assembly coupled with each chain for advancing or retarding the chains relative to one another for adjusting the orientation of the plates on the chains.

The apparatus of the present invention also includes a plate rejection station that more rapidly and accurately rejects plates that have been determined to be damaged or otherwise unsuitable for use in batteries. Specifically, the plate rejection station includes a pair of aligned conveyors, a cylinder assembly for lowering one end of one of the conveyors, and a cylinder assembly for raising one end of the other conveyor. The cylinder assemblies are cross-coupled so that as the first conveyor is lowered, the second conveyor is raised, thus creating a gap between the two conveyors to permit defective plates to be discarded from the conveyors.

The apparatus of the present invention also includes a plate synchronization station that allows the normal rapid transport of the battery plates to be temporarily suspended so that time-consuming processes occurring downstream can be completed. Then, when the plates are ready to be once again transported downstream, the plate delay synchronization assembly accurately places the plates in proper order so that the transport of the plates is synchronized with the remaining components of the plate feeding and handling apparatus.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING FIGURES

A preferred embodiment of the present invention is described in detail below with reference to the attached drawing figures, wherein:

FIG. 1 is a schematic layout in plan view of a battery plate feeding and handling apparatus constructed in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is an elevational view of one of the plate feeder and pick-up stations and lug brush cleaning stations of the apparatus taken along line 2—2 of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a side view of the lug brush cleaning station of FIG. 2;

FIG. 4 is a fragmentary plan view of the plate feeder and pick-up station shown in FIG. 2;

FIG. 5 is a sectional view of the plate feeder and pick-up station taken along line 5—5 of FIG. 4;

FIG. 6 is a schematic depiction of the plate feeder illustrating the transport of a stack of plates against a stop;

FIG. 7 is a schematic depiction of the plate feeder illustrating the transport of the stack of plates and showing the gripping of the forwardmost plate in the stack by the stop;

FIG. 8 is a schematic depiction of the plate feeder illustrating the transport of a stack of plates and showing the removal of the forwardmost plate of the stack by the pick-up assembly;

FIG. 9 is an elevational view of the lug brush cleaning station showing the lug brushes in their operating, cleaning position;

FIG. 10 is an elevational view of the lug brush cleaning station showing the brushes in their idle position;

FIG. 11 is an elevational view of the lug brush cleaning station showing the brushes in their operating position but after they have become worn and are ready to be replaced;

FIG. 12 is an elevational view of the lug brush cleaning station showing the brushes in their service position;

FIG. 13 is an elevational view of the plate alignment station and plate encapsulation station of the apparatus;

FIG. 14 is an elevational view of the plate alignment station;

FIG. 15 is a plan view of the plate alignment station;

FIG. 16 is a schematic depiction of the plate alignment station illustrating the positioning of a battery plate thereon;

FIG. 17 is a schematic depiction of the plate alignment station illustrating the positioning of a battery plate thereon;

FIG. 18 is a front view of the plate encapsulation station of the apparatus;

FIG. 19 is a side view of the drive side of the plate encapsulation station;

FIG. 20 is a side view of the opposite side of the plate encapsulation station showing several of the components in their removed position;

FIG. 21 is a sectional view taken along line 21—21 of FIG. 1 and showing the transport of a non-wrapped plate onto a conveyor;

FIG. 22 is a plan view of the plate rejection station and plate synchronization station of the apparatus;

FIG. 23 is an elevational view of the plate rejection and plate synchronization stations showing the plate rejection station in its normal operating position and showing the plate synchronization station in its delay mode;

FIG. 24 is an elevational view of the plate rejection and plate synchronization stations showing the plate rejection station in its rejection position and showing the plate synchronization station in its normal mode; and

FIG. 25 is a sectional view of one component of the plate synchronization station taken along line 25—25 of FIG. 1.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Turning now to the drawing figures, and particularly FIG. 1, the plate feeding and handling apparatus 10 of the present invention broadly includes a pair of automatic plate feeder and pick-up stations generally referred to by the numerals 12,14, a manual plate feeder station 16, three lug brush cleaning stations 18,20,22, a plate alignment station 24, a plate encapsulating station 26, a plate rejection station 28,

and a plate synchronization assembly 30. Each of these stations is discussed separately below.

Plate Feeder and Pick-Up Stations

The automatic plate feeder and pick-up stations 12,14 are described in detail in application Ser. No. 08/812,372, U.S. Pat. No. 5,934,866, entitled PLATE FEEDER APPARATUS, filed Mar. 5, 1997, hereby incorporated into the present application by reference. The station 12 handles battery plates that are to be wrapped in insulative material in the encapsulation station 26, whereas the station 14 handles plates that are not wrapped. The manual plate feeder station 16 is used for manually feeding battery plates into the production line for use in forming certain types of batteries that require an odd number of plates.

The automatic plate feeder and pick-up stations 12,14 are substantially identical; therefore only the station 12 is described and illustrated in detail herein. As best illustrated in FIGS. 2—8, the station 12 includes a plate feeder 32 that holds and sequentially feeds two stacks 34 of plates, and a pick-up 36 that successively picks or removes the forwardmost plate 38 from each stack and then drops the removed plates onto a conveyor 40. The conveyor then carries the plates to the lug brush cleaning station 18 as described below. The plate feeder and pick-up are driven by a drive shaft coupled with a conventional AC motor, which may in turn be coupled with a variable frequency drive and a PLC or other type of controller for automating the operation of the station.

As best illustrated in FIGS. 4 and 6—8, the plate feeder 32 has an inlet side 42 and an outlet side 44 and includes a pair of side-by-side conveyor assemblies 46,48. Each of the conveyor assemblies includes a pair of conveyor chains 50,52,54,56 trained over a set of drive and idler sprockets 58,60 and a plate pusher assembly 62 supported on top of the chains for holding and advancing the stacks 34 of plates towards the pick-up 36.

The outlet side 44 of each conveyor assembly 46,48 also includes a pair of stops 64,66,68,70 that serve as benchmarks to stop the forward movement of the plates on the conveyor chains 50,52,54,56. In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, each of the stops includes a vacuum port 72 that is coupled with a source of vacuum pressure.

The pick-up 36 includes a rotatable head 74 having at least two outwardly extending pick-up snouts 76 extending therefrom. As best illustrated in FIG. 4, the pick-up snouts are rotated between the chains 50,52,54,56 so that they contact the front surface of the forwardmost plates in the stacks 34 as described in more detail below. The pick-up snouts are coupled with a suitable source of vacuum pressure which is controlled by valve structure.

In operation, stacks 34 of plates are placed on the pusher assemblies 62, which are then placed on top of the conveyor chains 50,52,54,56. The plate feeder 32 is then operated to advance the pusher assemblies and stacks of plates towards the pick-up 36. To facilitate removal of only the forwardmost plate from each stack, the plate feeder shifts the stacks forward a first distance toward the pick-up and then shifts the stacks a second, shorter distance away from the pick-up during rotation of the pick-up as described in more detail below.

While the plate feeder 32 advances the stacks 34 of plates, the pick-up 36 rotates its snouts 76 in front of the forwardmost plates 38 in the stacks. The snouts are valved so that they are connected to vacuum pressure as they rotate in front of the plates and then disconnected from the vacuum pres-

sure as they pass over the conveyor **40**. This permits each snout to remove the forwardmost plate from its associated stack as it passes thereby, to hold the removed plate as the vacuum head continues to rotate, and then to release the plate over the conveyor.

As best illustrated in FIGS. 6-8, the operation of the plate feeder **32** and pick-up **36** are synchronized to ensure that the snouts **76** consistently pick or remove only the forwardmost plates **38** from the stacks **34** without damaging the removed plates as the snouts rotate by the stacks. The plate feeder initially advances the plates forward against the stops **64,66,68,70** before the pick-up snouts rotate by the stacks as illustrated in FIG. 6. The plate feeder then moves the stacks rearward as illustrated in FIG. 7 immediately before the snouts rotate by the stacks. This creates a gap between the forwardmost plates and the remaining plates in the stacks to ensure that the snouts remove only the forwardmost plates from the stacks. This also permits the snouts to continue to rotate by the stacks without striking the tail ends of the removed plates against the remaining plates in the stacks as illustrated in FIG. 8.

To further facilitate the removal of the forwardmost plates **38** from the stacks **34** without removing more than one plate from each stack, the vacuum ports **72** in the stops **64,66,68,70** are operated to capture and hold the forwardmost plates on the stops while permitting the plates behind the forwardmost plates to move slightly rearward, thus creating a gap between the forwardmost plates and the remaining plates in the stacks as illustrated in FIG. 7. This allows the snouts **76** of the pick-up **36** to gently contact the forwardmost plates as they are rotated thereby so that the snouts more consistently pick-up the forwardmost plates without picking up more than one plate each. This construction also allows the pick-up snouts to be operated at a lower vacuum pressure because less vacuum force is needed to pickup the forwardmost plates. The operation of the vacuum ports is preferably automatically sequenced with the rotation of the snouts with valve structure or under the control of a PLC or other controller.

After the snouts **76** have passed by the stacks **34**, the plate feeder **32** once again shifts the stacks to their forwardmost positions and then back to their rearwardmost positions before the next snouts arrive. This positions and captures the next forwardmost plates against the stops **64,66,68,70**. As mentioned above, the pusher assemblies **62** are moved forward toward the pick-up **36** a greater distance than they are moved away from the pick-up to account for the thickness of the removed plates. This ensures that the stacks are always positioned a pre-determined distance from the pick-up snouts regardless of how many plates have been removed.

The manual plate feeder station **16** illustrated in FIG. 1 is entirely conventional and includes a conveyor mechanism (not shown) on which battery plates may be manually placed for transport to the lug brush cleaning mechanism **22**. The manual plate feeder station is typically used only when batteries requiring an odd number of plates are to be manufactured.

Lug Brush Cleaning Stations

A lug brush cleaning station **18,20,22** is provided for each of the two automatic plate feeder and pick-up stations **12,14** and the manual plate feeder station **16**. The three lug brush cleaning stations are substantially identical; therefore only the station **18** is illustrated and described in detail herein.

As best illustrated in FIGS. 2 and 3, the lug brush cleaning station **18** includes a conveyor assembly **78** that receives and

transports plates from the conveyor **40** and a brush mechanism **80** for cleaning the lugs on the plates as they are transported thereby on the conveyor assembly **78**.

The conveyor assembly **78** preferably includes a pair of vertically stacked upper and lower conveyor belts **82,84** that are each trained around a drive roller **86,88** and an idler roller **90,92**, and a biasing mechanism **94** for biasing the conveyor belts into contact with one another. The drive rollers are vertically spaced a small distance apart to define a nip region therebetween for gripping the plates as they exit the conveyor **40** and introducing the plates between the two conveyor belts **82,84**.

The biasing mechanism **94** includes a fixed roller **96** positioned below the upper portion of the lower conveyor **84** and a spring-biased roller **98** positioned above the lower portion of the upper conveyor **82**. The spring-biased roller is coupled with a spring and lever mechanism **100** that exerts a downward force on the spring-biased roller so that the roller exerts a downward force on the upper conveyor **82**. This biases the conveyors into contact with one another to prevent the battery plates between the conveyors from moving relative to the conveyor belts as their lugs are being cleaned by the brush station. This also allows both of the conveyors to be driven by a single drive line if desired. The downward force exerted on the spring-biased roller by the lever mechanism can be selectively adjusted by an operator to provide the optimum amount of pressure between the two conveyors.

The brush mechanism **80** includes a pair of vertically stacked upper and lower rotatable brushes **102,104** each driven by a separate motor **106,108**. The brushes are preferably formed of steel and are approximately 10" in diameter and ½" thick. The brushes and their corresponding motors are supported on frames **110,112** that are suspended below an upper support **114** by a pair of tie rods **116,118**. As best illustrated in FIGS. 9-12, the upper ends of the tie rods are attached to a servo arm **120** that is coupled with the output shaft **122** of a servo motor and gear box **124** that is mounted on the support **114**.

As illustrated in FIGS. 9 and 11, the servo motor **124** can be operated to reposition the upper and lower brushes **102,104** as they become worn. Initially, when the brushes are new, the servo motor **124** positions the brushes as illustrated in FIG. 9. Then, as the brushes become worn and decrease in diameter, the servo motor gradually rotates the servo arm clockwise as illustrated in FIG. 11 to lower the upper brush **102** and raise the lower brush **104** to move the centers of the brushes closer together to maintain the contact between the outer edges of the brushes.

As the servo arm **120** is rotated clockwise, the tie rod **118** raises the lower brush **104** and the tie rod **116** lowers the upper brush **102** the exact same distance. Similarly, when the servo arm is rotated counterclockwise, the tie rod **118** lowers the lower brush **104** and the tie rod **116** raises the upper brush **102** the exact same distance. Thus, as the servo motor shaft **122** is rotated, the servo arm **120** and tie rods simultaneously lift or lower the brushes the same distance in the reverse direction so that the brushes are always the same distance away from the plates carried between the conveyors **82,84**.

To sense and monitor the positioning of the upper and lower brushes **102,104**, a pair of position sensing switches or contacts **126,128** may be mounted to the support **114**. The switches may be coupled with a controller or with indicators to alert an operator when the brushes become completely worn and need to be replaced.

In preferred forms, each of the tie rods **116,118** has two segments that are joined by a pancake cylinder **130,132**. As illustrated in FIG. **10**, the pancake cylinder **130** can be operated to raise the upper brush **102** a slight distance and the pancake cylinder **132** can be operated to lower the lower brush **104** a slight distance to create a small gap between the two brushes. The pancake cylinders are typically operated whenever the apparatus **10** is temporarily shut down and the conveyors **82,84** have been stopped. This separates the brushes from a battery plate **134** that has stopped therebetween to prevent the brushes from eroding the lug off of the battery plate.

The brush mechanism **80** also preferably includes a cylinder **136** that can be operated to lift the brushes **102,104** into a raised, service position as illustrated in FIG. **12**. The cylinder is attached to the frame **110** of the upper brush **102**, which is in turn connected to the frame **112** of the lower brush **104** by a tie rod **138**. As best illustrated in FIG. **9**, the tie rod is slightly longer than the spacing between the two frames when the brushes are in their operating positioning. The cylinder will therefore first raise the upper brush a short distance before the tie rod begins to raise the lower brush, thus slightly separating the brushes when they are in their service position illustrated in FIG. **12**.

Plate Alignment Station

The plate alignment station **24**, which is best illustrated in FIGS. **13–17**, receives the plates after they have been cleaned by the lug brush cleaning mechanism **18** and advances the plates to the plate encapsulation station **26**. The plate alignment station allows an operator to easily adjust the orientation or alignment of the plates before they enter the encapsulation station to ensure that the insulation is properly applied to the plates.

The plate alignment station **24** includes a conveyor **140** having a pair of side-by-side chains or belts **142,144** and a pair of servo assemblies **146,148** each coupled with one of the chains. As best illustrated in FIGS. **13** and **14**, the chains are each trained over a pair of idler sprockets **150,152** and a drive sprocket **154** and include a plurality of spaced projections **156** along the length thereof for contacting and advancing the battery plates toward the encapsulation station.

Each servo assembly **146,148** includes a pair of generally vertically extending levers **158,160,162,164** that are pivoted about their lower ends. Each pair of levers are coupled together with a spring or tie rod **166** (only one shown) and each includes an idler sprocket **168** on its upper end that contacts the outer surface of its corresponding conveyor chain. Each servo assembly also includes a servo or stepper motor **170,172** and a tie rod **174,176** that is connected between the upper end of the levers **158,162** and a pair of servo arms **178,180**. The servo arms are attached to the rotatable shafts **182,184** of the corresponding stepper motors.

The servo assemblies **146,148** can be operated to advance or retard one of the conveyor chains **142,144** relative to the other as illustrated in FIGS. **16** and **17** to adjust the orientation of a plate **186** supported on the conveyor chains. For example, when the shaft **182** of the servo or stepper motor **170** corresponding to the first conveyor chain **142** is rotated clockwise as illustrated in FIGS. **13** and **14**, the levers **158,160** are shifted to the right to slightly advance the first conveyor chain **142** relative to the second conveyor chain **144** as illustrated in FIG. **17**. Conversely, when the shaft **182** is rotated counterclockwise as illustrated in FIGS. **13** and **14**,

the levers **158,160** are shifted to the left to slightly retard the first conveyor chain **142** relative to the second conveyor chain **144** as illustrated in FIG. **16**.

The servo or stepper motors **170,172** may be operated individually or in unison and may be coupled with a PLC or other controller to automatically adjust the relative positioning of the conveyor chains **142,144** in response to a sensor that senses the orientation of the battery plates on the conveyor chains.

Plate Encapsulating Station

The plate encapsulating station **26** receives the battery plates from the plate alignment station **24** and applies insulation to the plates before discharging them to another conveyor **188**. As best illustrated in FIGS. **13** and **18–20**, the plate encapsulating station includes a pair of feed rollers **190** driven by a feed roller drive line **192**, a cutoff roller **194** and an anvil roller **196** driven by a second drive line **198**, and a pair of nip rollers **200** that are also driven by the second drive line. The feed rollers feed a web of insulation material **202** from a roll station (not shown) to the cutoff roller and the nip rollers for application to the battery plates as they pass between the nip rollers.

As best illustrated in FIG. **20**, the feed rollers, cutoff roller and nip rollers are mounted to separate frames **204,206,208** that can be selectively inserted or removed from tracks **210,212,214** formed in the housing of the encapsulating station. This allows all of the rollers to be easily removed and replaced during changeover of the plate encapsulating station.

Once the plates have been wrapped, the conveyor **188** carries the plates to a single chain conveyor **190** as illustrated in FIG. **1**. As a wrapped plate **216** is deposited on the conveyor **190**, the second lug brush cleaning station **20** delivers an unwrapped plate **218** to a perch **220** that is mounted slightly above the conveyor **190** as best illustrated in FIG. **21**. The perch has a slot along the length thereof that is parallel to the travel of the conveyor **190**. As the chain on the conveyor carries the wrapped plate **216** under the perch **220**, a lug **222** on the chain contacts and removes the unwrapped plate **218** from the perch so that it is stacked on top of the wrapped plate. The conveyor then carries the wrapped and unwrapped plates to the plate rejection station **28**.

Plate Rejection Station

The plate rejection station **28** receives the wrapped and unwrapped plates from the single chain conveyor **190** and delivers them to a final conveyor **224** that transports the plates to a stacking assembly (not shown). The plate rejection station is operable for rapidly rejecting damaged or otherwise defective plates before they reach the final conveyor.

As best illustrated in FIGS. **22–24**, the plate rejection station **28** includes a pair of horizontally aligned first and second conveyors **226,228** each having a receiving end **230,232** and a discharge end **234,236**. The first conveyor **226** includes a pair of belts **238,240** that are trained over a pair of idler rollers **242** and a pair of drive rollers **244**, and a positioning mechanism **246** for selectively lowering the discharge end **234** of the first conveyor. The positioning mechanism includes a cylinder **248** and a pivotal crank **250** that is attached between the cylinder and the drive rollers **244**. The cylinder can be selectively extended to raise the discharge end **234** of the first conveyor to an operating position (FIG. **23**) or retracted to lower the discharge end to a rejection position (FIG. **24**).

Similarly, the second conveyor **228** includes a pair of belts **252,254** that are trained over an idler roller **256** and a drive roller **258**, and a positioning mechanism **260** for selectively raising the receiving end **232** of the second conveyor. The positioning mechanism includes a cylinder **262** and a pivotal crank **264** that is attached between the cylinder and the drive roller **258**. The cylinder can be selectively extended to lower the receiving end **232** of the second conveyor to an operating position (FIG. **23**) or retracted to raise the receiving end to a rejection position (FIG. **24**).

During normal operating conditions, the first and second conveyors **226,228** are shifted to their operating positions illustrated in FIG. **23** so that plates may pass from the first conveyor to the second. However, when a defective plate **266** is detected, the first and second conveyors are shifted to their rejection positions illustrated in FIG. **24** so that the defective plate drops from the first conveyor before it reaches the second conveyor. The cylinders **248,262** are preferably cross-coupled so that as the cylinder **248** lowers the discharge end **234** of the first conveyor **226**, the cylinder **262** raises the receiving end **232** of the second conveyor **228**. This allows both of the conveyors to be simultaneously raised or lowered only a short distance to significantly increase the reaction time of the plate rejection station **28**.

The cylinders **248,262** may be manually controlled or may be coupled with a PLC or other controller to automatically reject plates in response to a sensor that senses defective or damaged plates.

Plate Synchronization Assembly

The final conveyor **224** receives the plates that have not been rejected by the rejection station **28** and transports the plates to a stacking assembly (not shown). The synchronization assembly **30** is provided for temporarily suspending the transport of the plates on the conveyor **224** so that the stacking assembly and other stations downstream of the apparatus **10** can be operated. Then, when the plates are ready to be once again transported downstream, the synchronization assembly accurately places the plates in proper order so that the transport of the plates through the apparatus **10** is synchronized with the operations that occur downstream of the apparatus.

As best illustrated in FIGS. **22–24**, the synchronization assembly **30** includes a mini-stack assembly **268** and a perch assembly **270**. The mini-stack assembly is positioned between the conveyor belts **272,274** of the final conveyor **224** and includes a support tray **276** having an upstanding backwall **278** that serves as a stop and a cylinder **280** for selectively raising and lowering the tray. When the tray is lowered as illustrated in FIG. **24**, the final conveyor transports the battery plates toward the stacking assembly without interruption. However, when the tray is raised as illustrated in FIG. **23**, the tray temporarily suspends the forward travel of the battery plates. The mini-stack assembly **268** may be manually operated or may be coupled with a PLC or other controller so that it is automatically operated in sequence with the stacking assembly.

The perch assembly **270** is operably coupled with the lug brush cleaning mechanism **22** of the manual plate feeder station **16** and includes a horizontally disposed platform **282**, a cylinder **284** for selectively extending and retracting the platform, and a fixed backstop **286** as best illustrated in FIGS. **22–25**. When the tray is extended as illustrated by the solid lines in FIGS. **22** and **25**, it catches a plate delivered by the manual plate feeder assembly. When the tray is retracted as illustrated by the dashed lines, it slides underneath the

backstop so that the battery plate supported thereon is dropped onto the conveyor **224**. The perch is operated in sequence with the mini-stack assembly so that it drops its battery plate at a precise location relative to the plates that are carried on the conveyor and released by the mini-stack. As mentioned above, the manual plate feeder station is only used for the manufacture of batteries requiring an extra wrapped or unwrapped plate.

Although the invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiment illustrated in the attached drawing figures, it is noted that equivalents may be employed and substitutions made herein without departing from the scope of the invention as recited in the claims.

Having thus described the preferred embodiment of the invention, what is claimed as new and desired to be protected by letters patent includes the following:

I claim:

1. A plate handling apparatus comprising:

a plate feeder for holding and advancing a stack of plates; and

a pick-up operably coupled with the plate feeder for successively removing a forwardmost plate from the stack;

the plate feeder including

a conveyor mechanism for moving the stack toward the pick-up,

a stationary stop, coupled with the conveyor mechanism, that is contacted by the forwardmost plate when the conveyor mechanism moves the stack toward the pick-up, and

a vacuum port coupled with the stationary stop for holding the forwardmost plate against the stationary stop before the pick-up removes the forwardmost plate from the stack.

2. The plate handling apparatus as set forth in claim **1**, the vacuum port including means for coupling with a source of vacuum pressure.

3. The plate handling apparatus as set forth in claim **1**, the conveyor mechanism including structure that moves the stack a first distance toward the pick-up and that subsequently moves the stack a second distance away from the pick-up before the pick-up removes the forwardmost plate from the stack.

4. The apparatus as set forth in claim **3**, wherein the first distance is greater than the second distance to account for the removal of the forwardmost plate from the stack.

5. The apparatus as set forth in claim **4**, the conveyor mechanism including a drive shaft, the structure including a crank assembly coupled with the drive shaft for rotating the drive shaft in a first direction for moving the stack the first distance toward the pick-up and for subsequently rotating the drive shaft in a second direction for moving the stack the second distance away from the pick-up.

6. The plate handling apparatus as set forth in claim **5**, the conveyor mechanism further including at least one endless conveyor chain and a pair of spaced-apart sprockets for supporting and rotating the chain, one of the sprockets being coupled with the drive shaft.

7. The apparatus as set forth in claim **1**, the pick-up including

an elongated rotatable vacuum head including means for coupling with a source of vacuum pressure, the vacuum head including at least one vacuum slot therein;

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at least one pick-up snout extending outwardly from the vacuum head and including a vacuum slot in alignment with the vacuum head vacuum slot;
valve structure interposed between the vacuum head vacuum slot and the snout vacuum slot, the valve structure being shiftable between an open position wherein it transfers the vacuum pressure from the

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vacuum head to the snout and a closed position wherein it disconnects the vacuum pressure from the snout; and means for shifting the valve structure between its open and closed positions during rotation of the vacuum head.

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